Introduction

The author of the present article is a scholar of Dutch linguistics and of the social history of that language, in particular. One could rightfully question what relevant contribution to a better understanding of “Anglo-German linguistic relations” can be expected from this background. In order to justify my presence in this collection of articles, I will therefore first try to clarify how my research on Dutch lower-class texts from the 19th century heavily depended on contributions of German scholars working on similar (German) archive material. Given that many of these important studies still do not enjoy the attention they deserve (largely due to the fact that they are written in German), I have chosen to discuss them in some detail. Next, I will highlight a number of recent studies on 19th-century English from the lower classes. Although there has been less than minimal contact between the German and English scholars involved in the cited research, a comparison of their research data should illustrate the major methodological and theoretical gains to be expected from systematic scholarly collaboration across language borders. As such, this article should be read as a plea for increased “Anglo-German” research contacts in one of the more salient domains of European historical sociolinguistics, i.e. social language variation during the so-called “long nineteenth century”. While scholars within the fields of Germanistik and Anglistik have both led the way in this domain for quite some time now “in mutual splendid isolation”, joint comparative research on the topic could result in a sound methodological and theoretical basis for similar research on lower-class texts from other language communities.

Although the information discussed below is presented from a comparative “Anglo-German” angle for the first time here, much of the data has been collected from two previous overview studies. (Vandenbussche 2006; Vandenbussche & Elspaß eds 2007) Given that the present article is necessarily brief, the reader can turn to those publications for further analysis and discussion.
Lower class writing from nineteenth-century Germany

From 1993 onwards, the Centre for Linguistics at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel was involved in a research project on the history of Dutch in 19th-century Flanders. This was the first major historical-sociolinguistic research project in Dutch language area ever, comprizing systematic research into the social language stratification at the time, on the basis of original archive material. In the context of my PhD thesis (Vandenbussche 1999), I covered the analysis of lower-class language use for the project and analyzed the written output of 19th-century “unschooled” letter-writers from the Flemish town of Bruges. The sources used for this study consisted of handwritten minutes of meetings from the earliest social security funds for manual labourers and craft apprentices in Bruges.

This research was partially triggered by the neglect of social language variation in the traditional historiography of 19th-century Dutch — the mainstream view of Flemish Dutch at the time was usually determined by references to the literary production of novelists and poets, genres that were completely out of touch with the actual everyday written language of the majority of the population.

The main impetus for our venture into lower-class writing came from the strong tradition of German research into so-called “Arbeitersprache”. Ever since the series of pioneering studies on the topic (Bielefeld/Lundt 1977, Akademie 1980, Schildt 1981) written in the former DDR during the late 1970s and early 1980s, the analysis of the “niedere Umgangssprache” of the lower classes during the industrial revolution has remained a constant leitmotif in German historical dialectology. A detailed discussion of the many revealing and inspiring conclusions of these cutting-edge (albeit ideologically biased) studies can be found in Vandenbussche 2006; a state-of-the-art analysis is further presented in three edited volumes on ‘Sprache und das 19. Jahrhundert’ published during the last decade of the past century. (Cherubim/Mattheier 1989; Wimmer 1991; Cherubim/Grosse/ Mattheier 1998)

The main conclusion to be remembered for the purpose of this article is the various authors’ firm conviction that Arbeitersprache should be considered as a variety of its own governed by specific linguistic norms, opposed to both the “Literatursprache” and the “gehobene Umgangssprache” of the upper classes. It was further claimed that this variety had a considerable though often neglected influence on the development of the German language from 1800 onwards.

Integrating the theoretical insights from the rapidly expanding discipline of sociolinguistics, Kettmann (1980, 1981) confirmed the clear opposition between the written literary language of the rich and the spoken everyday
language of the poor, but also refined the views mentioned above, stating that the *Umgangssprache* of the workers was not to be understood as a single isolated variety, but rather as a spectrum of varieties with ample internal (social and regional) variation. Part of this variability was attributed to the growing importance of schooling — and of language education in particular — as a status symbol in the age of industrialization and the making of the middle class.

At a time when the historical linguistics of German was still dominated by structuralist views, the aforementioned authors drew a number of crucial sociolinguistic factors to the fore when it came to assessing 19th-century linguistic reality in Germany. These comprised, amongst others:

- the relationship between “Umgangssprache”, “Literatursprache” and dialect;
- the make-up of the *Arbeiter’s* language continuum;
- the distinct functions of specific language varieties for various social classes in the speech community;
- the importance of 19th-century “language purification” strategies for the norm;
- the sharp contrast between grammatical and orthographical norms and everyday written language use;
- the importance of reading and writing instruction at the time.

Mattheier (1985a, 1985b, 1986, 1989, 1990) refined these analyses during the latter part of the 1980s in a succession of seminal studies on the linguistic and orthographic properties of everyday writing from the Ruhr area during the 19th century. He confirmed the particular character of *Arbeiter-sprache* as an “eigenständige Varietät” in the field of tension between oral and written language, but also warned against an oversimplified classification of its extreme variability as non-standard or erroneous. “Arbeitersprache”, Mattheier claims, should not be considered as one single variety but rather as a “Sprachstil”, i.e. a spectrum of varieties. Orthographic variation was a core characteristic of this *Sprachstil*, setting it apart from Standard German, which was first and foremost a spoken variety around 1800. The complex relationship between lower-class letter-writers and the written mode was further enhanced by the fact that the mass spread of literacy only originated in Germany at the beginning of the 19th century. A correct (present day) interpretation of the aforementioned historical orthographic variability further depends on the scholar’s understanding and appreciation of the social norms governing “linguistic correctness” at the time:
Ein Schreibender könnte sich eine weit größere Variabilität in Orthographie, Grammatik und Syntax erlauben als heute, ohne der Sanktion einer negativen Bewertung seiner Herkunft und gesellschaftlichen Position ausgesetzt zu sein. (Mattheier 1986: 225)

While it is true that the upper classes slowly started to consider consistent spelling behaviour as a token of class identity (or "educated" identity), these orthographic norms may have been of little or no importance to the lower-class writer. Hence the often extreme spelling variation within one and the same lower-class text. The heavy interference of local dialects in the written "Arbeitersprache" (as opposed to the alleged upper-class "Standard") may be interpreted as a further token of indifference towards upper-class linguistic norms.

The main characteristic of Arbeitersprache, however, was the occurrence of spelling chaos with so-called "Stilzusammenbrüche":

Es handelt sich dabei um sprachliche Fehlleistungen, die sich daraus ergeben, daß eine bestimmte syntaktische Konstruktion vom Schreiber begonnen wird, es ihm dann jedoch nicht gelingt, sie regelrecht zum Abschluß zu bringen. (Mattheier 1990: 292)

In other words: lower-class writers were not only innocent of upper-class norms but they could not master specific text type properties either. This combination set their writing behaviour apart from that of the higher social strata.

A number of young scholars continued this line of research during the 1990s. Schikorsky's (1990) dissertation on the "Geschichte des alltäglichen Sprachverhaltens "kleiner Leute"" confirms the singular character of lower-class writing, but also highlights a clear improvement in writing quality as the 19th century progressed. Due to the changing nature of their work (from manual labour to writing-oriented tasks), the letter-writers' language increasingly inclined towards upper-class language norms.

Klenk (1997) — a pupil of Mattheier's — firmly supports the thesis of an "Arbeiterschriftsprache" as a variety in its own right (this time based on evidence from mineworkers from 19th-century Prussia), but contains one very important observation that reflects a looming paradigm shift in this branch of historical sociolinguistics:

In anderen Berufsgruppen werden ähnliche Sprachstrukturen nur unter ähnlichen Bedingungen, wie sie für die Bergarbeiter galten, auftreten. Ist die Ähnlichkeit gegeben, können die Ergebnisse über eine an der Berufsgruppe der Bergarbeiter, ja sogar über eine an der Arbeiterschaft allgemein orientierte Konzeption hinausweisen. (Klenk 1997: 329)
Twenty years of in-depth research on German lower-class texts had elicited regular criticism of some of the methodological and theoretical issues mentioned above, but had also led to serious debates on the validity of "Arbeitersprache" as a sociolinguistic category.

Grosse et al. (1989, 1990a, 1990b) were the first to fully deny the treasured concept of an "Arbeitersprache" as a class-specific and distinct variety. The term is an "untauglicher Kollektivterminus", he claims, that does not stand the test of comparative archive research on lower- and upper-class texts: "Briefe von Angehörigen des Adels stehen in der individuellen, unsicheren Orthographie den Arbeiterbriefen nicht fern." (Grosse 1990a: 207) Mihm (1998) reinforces this criticism and firmly calls for a serious theoretical reconsideration of the Arbeitersprache concept. According to Mihm, there is no reason to question the sociolinguistic and language-historical relevance of the orthographic and stylistic text properties discussed above: it is an incontestable fact that many of the lower-class letter-writers in 19th-century Germany ignored official spelling rules, wrote in a purely idiosyncratic, creative and highly variably way, and frequently struggled with text type conventions, resulting in ubiquitous "Stilzusammenbrüche". The question remains whether the presence of these features should be attributed to class membership in the strictest sense. It is simply impossible to define a set of relevant linguistic features that are shared by all Arbeiter and by no other group, Mihm claims, whichever definition one uses for the working class. In the same line of thought "[kann man] auch nicht in einem linguistischen oder soziolinguistischen Sinn von einer 'Sprache des Bürgers' sprechen." (Mihm 1998: 294) In other words: the observed language patterns were real enough, but it is highly doubtful whether they really "defined" a variety as such.

This "bomb" under the theoretical foundations of the larger part of the above-mentioned studies would eventually inspire Elspaß’s (2005) plea for a "language history from below" ("Sprachgeschichte von Unten"). As far as focus is concerned, Elspaß follows all the authors in the "tradition" sketched above, advocating a language history which does not limit itself to the written production of a numerically small elite, but which also includes the actual real-life language written by the very large segment of the lower ranks of society. The refreshing element in Elspaß’s linguistic treatment of the historical lower-class sources is to be found in his interpretation of the data and in his search for factors that can explain the remarkable linguistic communalities and oddities in workers' texts across Germany. By moving away from a fixation on clear cut class oppositions ("the" lower class vs. "the" elite) in favour of a focus on the various phenomena that can define and construct a specific element of multifaceted social identities (quality and nature of writing education, work-related requirements and skills, the
importance of writing skills for one’s social status, etc.). Elspaß’s study of lower-class writing finally broke free of the ideological paradigm in which it originated in the 1970s.

*Lower-class writing from nineteenth century England*

The “German tradition” outlined above proved invaluable for my personal research on Flemish lower-class texts during the latter part of the 1990s (cf. Vandenbussche 2007 for an overview of the main findings). Shortly after the completion of my Ph.D., an article by Tony Fairman (2000) was brought to my attention, dealing with ‘English Pauper Letters 1830–34, and the English Language’. Fairman analyzed “lower order letters” of unschooled or partially-schooled letter-writers found in various English Record Office archives. These letters often concerned relief applications (requests for money or food), reflecting the social misery among paupers in Britain at the time. A number of striking parallels could be drawn between the German research on Arbeiter sprache (and also my research on Flemish lower-class writing) and the English data, both with regard to the type of texts used and the linguistic properties of these documents. No German scholars had made any reference to similar research in England — as it was, there was no reference whatsoever to any similar research outside the German language area. Likewise, the English scholar was unfamiliar with the impressive amount of information from Germany. In both cases this was attributed to the “language border”: all articles quoted above were written in German only and none of the information was ever published in another language.

Thomas Sokoll’s (2001) edition of Essex pauper letters from the late 18th and early 19th centuries confirmed the ample opportunities for comparative research between German and English lower-class documents from 1800 onwards. Sokoll is a social historian, not a linguist, however. As such, his prime interest was not in stylistic features or orthographic variation, and the aforementioned studies went by equally unnoticed (ironically, he is German and would not have experienced any linguistic difficulties).

The “linguistic turn” in British social history had already rendered an impressive body of work on historical sociolinguists from the historians’ point of view (cf. the seminal studies by Burke & Porter 1987, 1991, 1995), but Sokoll was among the first to foreground lower-class letters. Despite the overt intention among British scholars to bridge gaps between historical sociolinguistics and social history (as confirmed by the sterling work of Burke and Porter), Fairman’s work had not been brought to Sokoll’s attention, either.
The reader is referred to Fairman (2000, 2002 and 2007) for the detailed linguistic analyses of these English pauper texts. The text below (from Fairman 2007) gives an impression, however, of the type of language mastery encountered in these documents.

i have sent to you mister holden that i have no wark to doe and you mst [must] send me sum muney i have Bean hout of wark a 11 weeks [have not arnt But I pound i was at wark wen you sent me that muny [at muster pues it was But afue days i have arnt But 2 shilens [for
5 three weeks i have pond all my things and i have got my [furest and
if you doe not send me sume muney i shall came [home ass possiBle my wife expects to Be put to Beed every day [and thear is a procts for me in a few weeks
[But when i git in to warke praps i may never truBle [you no more But if you wil not help me thrw one [kurtor you 10 must surport my wife and famely all ther [lifetsme when tu theare is a
nesety i nevery will try [to make my self a setelmenet aney more ]you sent ward that my wife arnt a greate deal [of muney sureny she youst to arn a gouda deal But [she have arnt nothing latly not and she is not likeley ]to arn aney more for sumtime you sed i might have [Bean at
15 mister Clopper tl this time But your [perther node nothing a But
my busens [you may tel mester rouse to cole at mester pues [then e wil tl you all aBut my busens [ples to send me sum muney Bay rouse on fridy [sm to pay sum of my deats of if not i shall [cume over next munday and git abuse in my houn [parshes. (written by Benjamin Brooker, 2 December 1825)

The reader will note that this letter-writer ignores official spelling rules and introduces a large amount of spelling variation, very much like his German (and Flemish) counterparts at the time. As far as punctuation and capitalization are concerned, this letter is equally reminiscent of what can be read in the German lower-order letters. Instances of “Stilzusammenbrüche” can be found throughout the text and the overall text structure is as “shaky” as in many of the examples quoted by Mattheier, Schikorsky, Ktenk and Elspaß.

Fairman (2007: 172) adds that there are orthographic units whose orthography and grammar readers cannot predict according to the “Standard”. Very much like the German researchers above, he concludes that it is unfair to judge or evaluate this letter-writer’s writing abilities according to the standard norms at the time: “If writers show that they couldn’t write ‘Standard’ grammar,” he says, “there is no reason to assume they knew ‘Standard’ spelling.” (ibid.)

In short: both as far as the stylistic and orthographic features of the text are concerned, as well as regarding the meta-linguistic issue of determining which “variety” or “language stage” the text represents, German and English linguists involved with lower-class texts from the 19th century face the very
same questions, problems and dilemmas. The observation may seem naive or even trivial, but this mutual research interest and shared experience (regarding both the content and form of the data at hand) simply cries out for an intensive exchange of knowledge and expertise, and for strong international collaboration between German and English historical socio-linguists across language borders. This “Anglo-German cultural relation” in the field of social language history would, moreover, constitute an inspiring and powerful example for research on non-standard texts from the lower classes in other language communities.

From Anglo-German to international and cross-disciplinary collaboration on lower-class writing

The remarkably similar linguistic properties of the German and English lower-class texts might be interpreted as an argument against the claim that there was no such thing as an Arbeitersprache as a variety in its own right. If writing features similar to those in German workers’ texts appear in other countries in texts pertaining to the same social class, it may be tempting to give in to the illusion that Arbeitersprache contains “universal” features. At first sight recent results from historical-sociolinguistic research in other language communities even appear to support this view. Over the past five years, studies on lower-class writing have seen the light in, among other places, Denmark, Finland and Québec. (cf. the contributions by Sandersen, Nordlund and Martineau in Vandenbussche & Elspaß eds 2007) The most recent addition to the field is a study on Russian peasant letters. (Yokoyama 2008) All scholars list the same spelling and style “problems” as those mentioned above as typical elements of the language found in their archive data.

However (and not surprisingly), the Flemish data from Bruges proved the assumption of universal lower-class features to be wrong. Whereas lower-class letter-writers combined variable spelling patterns with “Stilzusammenbrüche” throughout the whole “long nineteenth century” in the text corpus, the same combination was found in parallel corpora with middle- and upper-class texts. While the middle-class letter-writers switched to “standard” writing around in 1850, the upper classes adopted the standard even earlier, in around 1800. The time of the transition from variable to consistent spelling co-occurs with the spread of literacy through society in Bruges: information on literacy in 19th-century Belgium from social historians teaches us that the upper and middle class in Bruges became fully
literate just before 1800 and around 1840 respectively. The lower classes only reached the same level well into the 20th century.

All of these recent studies on non-Anglo-German lower-class writing from the 19th century join in a series of crucial questions. How was literacy instruction organized in a specific society, and what was the relation between language teaching and writing quality? What is known about the history of pauper education in the community under scrutiny? How did the nature of a letter-writer’s work environment influence the development of personal skills; in other words, how relevant was the opposition between professions that were handarbeit- or schriftarbeitorientiert for one’s level of writing skill? How important was literacy for the construction of one’s social identity?

Given the impressive state of experience and expertise in the analysis of 19th-century lower-class texts in both the German and English scholarly community, a systematic collaboration (including disclosure of the research results to a large international audience) between the research groups from these communities (both linguists and historians) would present a major methodological and theoretical support for anyone who wants to undertake similar research, both on the history of German and English, or on any other language.

References


